The Fourth Church Pulpit

DEAR GOD, DO SOMETHING QUICK!

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FOURTH
PRESBY
TERIAN
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A LIGHT IN THE CITY

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Scripture: Mark 13:32-37, Isaiah 64:1-2, 11-12

"O that you would tear open the heavens and come down, . . ."
Isaiah 64:1 (NRSV)

Several years ago there was a little book published with the engaging title *Children's Letters to God*. It is just what the title says: a compilation of brief messages, written by little children, putting into words whatever they wanted to say to God. The letters are full of innocence and hope and trust. Some of them are wise, as only children can be on occasion.

My favorite is printed in the large block letters of a first-grader:

> "Dear God,
>
> Are you real? Some people don't believe it.
> If you are, you better do something quick.
>
> Harriet Ann"

I think that Harriet Ann has said it for you and me, and the whole human race. I believe it is the human prayer, prayed on and off through life, but prayed with particular urgency when things happen which assault us so deeply. Our very faith comes into question; prayed with urgency when things happen which simply don't make sense if God is real.

Terry Anderson has written a memoir documenting his experience as a hostage for seven years, *Den of Lions*. Anderson was a reporter with A. P., living in Beirut. On March 16, 1985, he was abducted and for the next seven years, along with other men whose names we came to know — Terry Waite, Thomas Sutherland, The Reverend Benjamin Weir, a Presbyterian mission worker who came to Fourth Church to speak about his experiences, Father Martin Jenko from Joliet, whose sister was here when Ben Weir spoke. For seven years Anderson was a hostage, a prisoner, in a blindfold, most of the time chained to a wall in a series of dark, damp, filthy rooms — transported from hiding place to hiding place underneath the carriage or in the trunk of a car, totally bound in packing tape. For one period of three years, he never saw the sun. One of the experiences that Anderson records in his powerful and engaging book is his spiritual journey. A Christian, a lapsed Roman Catholic, Anderson found himself thinking a lot about God and faith. He asked for a Bible and began to read and reread and when Father Jenko and he shared a cell, Anderson made his confession. But throughout there is a very human struggle, expressed with a news reporter's clarity and directness:

> "I reach so hard to touch God, concentrating, waiting for something, some acknowledgement from Him that I exist, that He's listening. I get back only blankness. Long nights . . . mind spinning, thoughts, emotions whirling, anger, frustration, pain, guilt.
>
> "I can't do this, God. I'm finished. I surrender. There's nothing I can do to change anything, nothing anyone can do. And it's just going to go on, and I can't do it. Help me. You say you love me, so help me." [p. 75]

A forty-year-old man . . . a six-year-old child . . . "Dear God, you better do something quick." Their prayer is the human prayer, the prayer every man and woman prays in some way or another at some time or another.

A poet of magnificent art and deep insight wrote his version of the prayer 2,500 years ago. . .

> "O that you would tear open the heavens and come down . . . to make your name known to your adversaries."

Like Terry Anderson, the prophet is writing about captivity. Only he's writing about his people. Judah is being held hostage. The kings of Judah have made a series of foolish decisions and have managed to infuriate Babylon, the most powerful empire in the region. For two years the Babylonian army lays siege to Jerusalem. Finally, in 587 B.C.E., the city falls. The conquering Babylonians smash the city walls, burn all the major buildings, level the Temple of Solomon and carry off into exile the royal house, several thousand leading citizens, military people, politicians, priests, artisans. A generation passes. "How can we sing the Lord's song in a foreign land?" the people lament. "Why has this happened to God's chosen people? Why doesn't God do something? Why are we suffering, persecuted, humiliated? Why doesn't God at least say something?"

Are there more poignant lines anywhere?

> "Our holy and beautiful house, where our ancestors praised you,
> has been burned by fire, and all our pleasant places have become ruins.
> After all this, will you restrain yourself, O Lord? Will you keep silent . . .?"
> [Isaiah 64:11, 12]

> "Dear God, you better do something quick."

> "You say you love me, so help me."

For 2,500 years and more human beings have been praying the same prayer, longing for God to act, to deliver, to rescue, to say something . . . anything, to show that the people, we, that is, are not alone. That is precisely why the Christian church observes Advent in the way it does, singing hymns about exile and loneliness, reading about captivity and yearning and longing for God. That is why we are not ready to sing "Joy to the World," but instead insist first on reliving annually our forbearers' experience of God's absence and silence.

It might be easier to focus our celebrating and worshiping on pleasing motifs: angels and shepherds and magi. . . . And yet our deepest need is to know that when life caves in, when the worst happens, we are not alone. Who hasn't prayed Harriet Ann's prayer?

> "Why? Why has this happened? Why, if there is a God of goodness and love; why,
> if there is a God looking after me; why, if there is ultimate justice and compassion?"

The absence of God, the silence of God, the weakness of God, who doesn't know about it? Who has not experienced the loss of a dear one and wanted to cry, to shout to heaven, "Why?" Who has not learned about a natural disaster, a plane crash, an AIDS epidemic and wanted to say, "Dear God, is this necessary?" Who hasn't read about a dear young child caught in the crossfire, dead at age seven, and at least thought if not prayed, "Can't you do something about that, God?"

One who has and who has written eloquently about it is Nicholas Wolterstorff, a professor of philosophy at Yale and formerly Calvin College, a thoughtful Christian. Wolterstorff's twenty-five-year-old son, Eric, was killed in a mountain climbing accident and he writes of his grief and his faith struggle in a little book, *Lament for a Son.*

> "To the most agonized question I have ever asked, I do not know the answer. I do not know why God would watch him fall". . .

And then comes a prayer . . . his prayer . . . the prayer . . .

> "I am at an impasse, and you, O God, brought me here. From my earliest days I heard of you . . . believed in you. On me your presence smiled. Where are you in the darkness? I learned to spy you in the light. Here in the darkness I cannot find you." [p. 68, 69]

Sooner or later life brings us to such a place and brings such a prayer to our lips. If we know anything, you and I, it is that there is no easy answer. While Harriet Ann's prayer is eloquently simple, it raises a question that does not submit to superficial, simple piety.

As the ancient prophet struggles with the issue, two thoughts begin to emerge and they are perhaps the two most important theological ideas in the history of human thought.

The first is that God doesn't cause human suffering, or prevent it, or for that matter, explain it. God shares it, enters into it. God, this poet suggested nearly 600 years before Christ, enters so deeply into the human situation, that what happens to human beings has an effect on God. God assumes the burden of suffering. God's representative is a "suffering servant." It was, and is, a remarkable thought: a God who is vulnerable; a God who for love becomes vulnerable; a God who accepts, and experiences, the same suffering and loss and grief which afflict human beings; a God whose prominent characteristics, therefore, can no longer be described exclusively as power, might, judgment, strength, but now compassion, kindness, mercy and love; a God, therefore, who does not banish suffering, but stands shoulder to shoulder with us in its midst, and holds us up and lifts us when we begin to fall and strengthens us to live through it.

And the second idea is that even in the midst of the most distressing circumstances, there are signs of hope. God, though vulnerable, is also always present to create the possibility of new life and redemption. The prophet could see things the captives could not see: liberation was coming, freedom, restoration, a highway in the desert. No matter what happens to us, God's power and love can create newness and goodness and hope in its midst. Be watchful, the Gospel of Mark urges. You don't know when or where he will come. But watch for signs of hope. Expect, anticipate, watch for God's hope.

The late Abraham Heschel, distinguished Jewish philosopher and theologian, said that Isaiah's image of God as a woman about to give birth is the boldest and most hopeful divine representation in all of religious literature . . . pain and promise . . . pain and hope . . . pain and new life. The faith issue in Advent is always about hope in the midst of despair, light shining in darkness. The faith issue is not "Do you believe Jesus was born in Bethlehem?" (There is a sense in which everybody is captivated by that part of the story.) but do you trust God to bring signs of hope and restoration into our world, into our darkness?

The most moving thing about *There Are No Children Here,* both Alec Kotlowitz's fine book and Oprah Winfrey's television adaptation, is the presence of indomitable hope in a mother and her sons, living in the most desperate of circumstances.

Oprah Winfrey, at the end of the television program, was asked if she thought the project would change anything for the better. Her answer surprised me.

> "Probably not," she said. "People will say, 'Someone should do something about that' and then go about their business."

Well, maybe not. It's Advent, after all. Maybe there are enough people who believe in God and therefore know that God is always planting seeds and bearing children of hope and who therefore not only watch and wait but expect and anticipate and go to work in the name of hope and love — people who will not rest until we establish sanity on the streets of this city and something resembling peace and hope in our schools and compassion in our economic system.

The truth is God did not rip open the sky and reach down and lift Judah from its ghetto in Babylon. God invites the people, in the fullness of hope, to lift up their heads and hearts and start a journey of faith full of risk, danger and demand; a journey through a desert. God promises not to fix everything, but to be with them; to give them strength and courage for the journey. God, in fact, doesn't rip open the walls of Terry Anderson's cell and loosen his chains.

> "I just can't do it," Anderson wrote. But he did it . . . survived intact, kept sanity and humanity. How? "But at the bottom, in surrender so complete there is no coherent thought, no real pain, no feeling, just exhaustion, just waiting, there is something else. Warmth/light/softness. After a while, some strength. Enough for now.
>
> "It happens once, twice. A few hours later, it fades, and the anger and frustration and longing are back. But the memory is there, the sense of presence." [p. 75]

And Nicholas Wolterstorff survives the most devastating loss he can imagine. "Eric should have buried me" he says, as every parent says when a child dies. How did he survive? He writes near the end of the book:

> "God is not only the God of the sufferers but the God who suffers. The pain and fallenness of humanity have entered into his heart. Through the prism of my tears I have seen a suffering God. [p. 81] We're in it together, God and we, together in the history of our world." [p. 90]
>
> "O that you would tear open the heavens and come down."
>
> "Dear God, you better do something quick."

God hears those prayers. God hears you when you pray those prayers. God comes to you and me when we find those prayers on our lips.

How can I say that? How can you believe that? Because God has come in a stable, behind a crowded inn, in Bethlehem of Judea, a long time ago.

Because God chose to answer the ancient prayer quietly, silently, in human birth.

Because the child grew and reflected God's love and power and grace in a way we have never been able to forget, living our life, walking our roads, loving with our love, weeping our tears. . . and finally, knowing what it is to watch a beloved child die.

Because he invites us to trust him, which means to entrust to him our lives, the lives of our dear ones.

Because it is this Christ who invites us to eat and drink with him, and promises to be with us. . . forever. Wait. Watch for him. All praise to him. Amen.